

Cohabitation and Relationship Quality
across the Transition to Parenthood

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Abstract

The current study looks at how the initial transition to parenthood effects couples differently based on their status. A sample of 182 currently married or cohabiting couples (*New Parents Project*) from a Midwestern city was given questionnaires to measure each couple's relationship quality (Dyadic Adjustment Scale) and the types of resources (i.e. emotional, social, financial) that go into the keeping up the couple's relationship at four different time points. The study found that currently cohabiting couples reported lower relationship quality than both groups of married couples: married, premarital cohabitation, and married, no premarital cohabitation. Using a random effects regression model, the study also found that the depressive symptoms and family and social resources to be important mechanisms in the difference in relationship quality between currently cohabiting mothers and both groups of married counterparts as well as the difference in relationship quality between currently cohabiting fathers and married, no premarital cohabitation. Further studies into this realm should include a more diverse sample and the support of observational data.

Cohabitation and Relationship Quality across the Transition to Parenthood

The transition to parenthood is a time of stress for most new parents. In fact, new parents often experience a decline in relationship quality (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003) that persists over time, even up to 8 years later (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Less research on the transition to parenthood has been done in non-marital populations. We seek to extend the literature by examining how relationship quality changes among married couples who did not live together before marriage, married couples who lived together before marriage, and currently cohabiting couples. We specifically examine changes in relationship functioning and overall quality using questionnaire data.

Previous research found that couples who cohabited demonstrated more negative relationship quality compared to couples who did not cohabit (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). Doss et al. (2009) extended the literature on the transition to parenthood by examining how married couples who cohabited before marriage fared across the transition. They found that both fathers and mothers who cohabited premaritally had more difficulty over the transition to parenthood than couples who had not cohabited before marriage (Doss et al., 2009). When examining the transition to parenthood as it relates to cohabitation, it is important to look at three different areas of the family literature. We draw on the cohabitation literature, the transition to parenthood literature, and the family transitions literature to inform our perspectives on the intersection of cohabitation and the transition to parenthood.

The Chronic Strain of Transitions Perspective. The lasting negative impacts of family transitions were elegantly modeled in Amato (2000)'s divorce-stress-adjustment perspective on the long-term effects of divorce. This model strove to illustrate how and why families change when going through a negative family transition. The chronic strain model argued that negative transitions cause a downward spiral of family functioning, and although the net effect of negative transitions vary depending on factors such as personal resources and social support, most of those involved in the transition will not rise to their original level of individual or family functioning. Both cohabitation and the transition to parenthood have been argued to have long lasting negative effects on future relationship quality.

The transition to parenthood literature has argued that the transition to parenthood is “a qualitative change in the relationship such that it is relatively abrupt, adverse in nature, relatively large in magnitude, and likely to persist” (Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2009, p. 41). This is similar to the experience of cohabitation perspective, though traditionally, this literature has not discussed the “transition to cohabitation” in the same way that the transition to parenthood literature has. Essentially, the overall idea is the same, however. The transition to cohabitation is thought to cause relationship dysfunction in and of itself (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003). Cohabitation has been found to have lasting negative effects on relationship quality, even when the relationship transitions into marriage (Stanley, Whitton, and Markman, 2004). It is thought that the movement into a less committed, more ambiguous, co-residential relationship, that has an easier escape route than divorce, qualitatively changes the relationship and causes the couple to be less committed and to function less well even after marriage. Crudely, both perspectives blame the nature of the beast. Basically, a transition into a new state – i.e., parenthood or cohabitation, occurs, and because of the transition and the nature of the new context of the relationship, relationship functioning is thought to decrease. Or, it is thought that had that transition not occurred, the next state – marriage for cohabitation, continuing marriage for the transition to parenthood – would have been more successful. Unfortunately, due to a lack of longitudinal, developmental data on dating relationships, the transition to cohabitation perspective has not been well tested.

Hypothesis 1. Based on this perspective, we expect that pre-birth, parents that are married, but did not live together before marriage will report the highest levels of relationship functioning, followed by parents that are married but lived together before marriage, and finally, we expect that currently cohabitating parents will report the lowest levels of relationship functioning. Further, based on this perspective, we expect that all couples, regardless of status, will decline in relationship functioning across the transition to parenthood.

The Crisis and Readjustment of Transitions Perspective. The crisis model, according to Amato (2000), assumes that divorce, or any family transition, acts as a transient stage to which families adjust over time. The model assumes that with time, the family will regain their pre-transition level of functioning. Similar

to this perspective is the idea in the literature on the transition to parenthood that the transition is a significant, but transient stage in the couple's relationship. Changes expected from this perspective are quantitative, rather than qualitative, and the arrival of the baby is thought to produce varying degrees of temporary changes based on the couple's adaptive ability (Lawrence et al, 2009).

Both of these perspectives rely on the couple's or family's ability to adapt to the stressful situation and come out of it with functioning at a level near that of the level of functioning before the situation took place. By adaptive ability we refer to the resources a couple possesses - including, but not limited to, monetary, familial, emotional, and social support resources. Adaptive ability also incorporates the importance the couple places on the transition as well as the couple's demographic characteristics (Amato, 2000). These aspects and resources are associated with aspects of the selection perspective on cohabitation, which states that cohabitation in-and-of-itself is not a negative experience, but that cohabiters are inherently different from non-cohabiters making them more susceptible to poor marital quality and divorce (Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003), in that the cohabitating couples who possess these qualities stand at a disadvantage in both the resources they start out with and those they lose throughout the relationship.

Cohabitating couples have been found to be more likely to have less traditional family values, to be less religious, to have experienced parental divorce, to have been in a previous marriage/divorce, to have less education, to live in an urban community, and to live further away from family than those who marry (Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009). Cohabitors are two times less likely to have at least weekly contact with their parents (Kalmijn, 2006) and may be faced with familial stress, especially when mothers have negative attitudes about cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993), which results in a much weaker, if not non-existent familial/emotional support system. Cohabitors have been found to be much less religious which discounts a second "familial" type and emotional support system found in a religious community (Hogerbrugge & Dykstra, 2009). Cohabitating couples have been found to make less money on average than married couples, showing that those who cohabit also lack a financial support system (Buchler, Baxter, Haynes, & Western, 2009). The 2000 US census found that cohabitating couples are significantly

younger than those who are married and most cohabitating couples are African American, Hispanic, American Indian, Pacific Islander, or some other race (not white). Taken together, these characteristics limit opportunities, economic support, and community support for cohabitating couples (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003) a situation that may persist in marriage if couples marry after a period of cohabitation.

Hypothesis 2. Based on this perspective, we expect that after controlling for monetary, familial, emotional, and social support resources, we will find no pre-birth differences in relationship functioning between couples that are married but did not live together before marriage, couples that are married but lived together before marriage, and cohabiting couples. Further, based on this perspective, we expect that all couples will decline in relationship functioning across the initial transition to parenthood, but that relationship quality will rise after the transition, particularly for those couples with more monetary, familial, emotional, and social support resources.

Method

Sample. The data for this study come from the New Parents Project, a study of 182 cohabitating or married couples living in and around a large Midwestern city. Couples were recruited through means of local OBGYN offices, birthing classes, and strategically placed flyers/advertisements in such locations as baby/maternity stores, grocery stores, community colleges, health centers and local newspapers. In order to be eligible the couples had to be both first time parents and biological parents of the expected child; had to be working full-time and planning to return to work at least part time within 3 months of the child's birth; had to be married or cohabitating; had to be at least 18 years old; had to be English speaking and literate; and had to be planning to stay in the area throughout the child's first nine months of life. Qualifying couples were asked to complete 4 different phases of the study: third trimester, and three, six and nine months postpartum. These couples were compensated at the completion of each phase.

Procedures. Eligible couples were sent links to online surveys (Phase 1 only) or were mailed packets with paper questionnaires. Links or questionnaires were sent in the third trimester of pregnancy, and at Phase 2, 3, and 4, about two weeks before the designated data collection point (i.e., at 2 and a half months post-partum for the Phase 2 data point).

Measures

Dependent variables. The dependent variable in this study is relationship quality which we helped to measure using a 3 question version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). These questions from the DAS asked the participant to rate their relationship on a 6-point scale using questions such as “Do you confide in your mate?”

Independent variables. We coded relationship status as 2 = cohabiting, 1 = married, premarital cohabitation, and 0 = married, no premarital cohabitation. Relationship status used in our analysis was taken from measurements as phase 1.

Explanatory variable - resources. A variety of measures in the data was used to create a scale of the sum of available “resources”. The scale includes familial/social resources where a high quality is represented as a 6 for each relationship with mother, father, or in-laws, and a 1 would be low quality relationship with mother, father, or in-laws. Familial/Social resources were measured at all phases. Importance of religion was coded as a 1 for very important and a 4 for not at all important; this variable was measured only at phase 1. Emotional resources was coded as 0 = not clinically depressed and 4 = clinical depression as measured by the CES-D. Emotional resources were measured at all phases. Monetary/human capital resources was coded as 0 = college degree or higher education, 1 = less than college degree. Age was coded in years. Race was coded as 1 = white, and 0 = non-white. Relationship duration was coded in months. Income was coded in dollars. Age, race, and relationship duration were measured solely at phase 1, while education and income levels were measured at all phases.

Analysis

To test the first hypothesis we will run t-tests to compare levels of relationship quality between married and cohabitating couples, as well as to compare pre-birth relationship quality levels to post-birth levels. To test the second hypothesis we will run a random effects regression model to test the effect of different sets of resources on the association between relationship quality and relationship status.

Descriptive Statistics

Overall, for mothers, the sample was one-third married, never cohabited mothers, more than half married, premaritally cohabited mothers, and about an eighth currently cohabiting mothers. The average age was 28.8 years and the sample was heavily white. Average income was about 81,000 dollars and one-fourth of mothers lacked a college degree. Mothers reported average relationship duration of 4.01 years. For the dependent variable, the DAS, at phase 1 mothers reported a mean score of 16.79, at phase 2 a mean score of 16.36, and at phase 4 a mean score of 20.96. Mothers also reported a mean CES-D score of 1.63. In terms of relationship quality with parents, mothers reported a mean score for their fathers of 3.75, a mean score for their mothers of 4.33, and a mean score for their in-laws of 3.66. For religiosity, mothers reported a mean score of 3.10.

Overall, for fathers, the sample was one-third married, never cohabited fathers, more than half married, premaritally cohabited fathers, and about an eighth currently cohabiting fathers. The average age was 31 years and the sample was heavily white. Average income was around 83,000 dollars and a third of fathers lacked a college degree. Fathers reported average relationship duration of 4.21 years. For the dependent variable, the DAS, at phase 1 fathers reported a mean score of 16.49, at phase 2 a mean score of 16.06, and at phase 4 a mean score of 20.71. Fathers also reported a mean CES-D score of 1.63. In terms of relationship quality with parents, fathers reported a mean score for their fathers of 3.71, a mean score for their mothers of 3.98 and a mean score for their in-laws of 3.84. For religiosity, fathers reported a mean score of 2.86.

Results

To examine the first hypothesis, questionnaire data for each participant was used to measure pre-birth levels of relationship quality as well as the change in relationship quality between the first and second phases. For mothers, the difference in the pre-birth relationship quality means ($t = 1.27$) between married, never cohabited mothers, and currently cohabiting mothers is significant ($p = .000$). The difference in means ($t = 1.01$) between married, premarital cohabitation, and currently cohabiting mothers is also significant ($p = .001$). For fathers, the difference in means ($t = .62$) between married, never

cohabited, and currently cohabiting fathers was approaching significance ($p = .09$). The significance of these differences seems to support the first part of the hypothesis; that married, never cohabited, participants will experience higher levels of relationship quality than those currently cohabiting. The change of relationship quality between the first phase and second phase was also examined using this data. For those participants of the married, never cohabited, group, mothers experienced a significant ($p = .01$) decline in relationship quality ($t = -.42$) between phases one and two, while fathers average change of $-.22$ was not significant. In the married, premarital cohabitation, group, mothers experienced an average decline of $-.42$ which was significant ($p = .003$); fathers experienced an average decline of $-.29$ which was significant ($p = .04$). In the currently cohabiting group, mothers experienced an average decline of $-.82$ which was significant ($p = .06$); fathers experienced an average decline of -1.48 which was significant ($p = .001$).

To examine the second hypothesis, questionnaire data for each participant was used to measure familial and social resources, emotional resources, and human capital resources and whether or not these resources caused any significant differences for couples based on cohabitation status. For mothers, currently cohabiting mothers were less satisfied than married mothers regardless of whether or not they lived together before they were married. Emotional resources appear to partially reconcile the difference between cohabiting mothers and married mothers, who had cohabited prior to marriage; this reconciliation however, did not make the difference insignificant. Family and social resources and human capital resources appear to at least partially mediate the association between marital status and relationship quality; this mediation did not cause the difference to lose significance. The inclusion of the full model did force the coefficients to lose significance. Of the full model, the CES-D appears to hold significance. For fathers, currently cohabiting fathers reported lower relationship quality than both married fathers who lived together before marriage, and those who did not. Like with mothers, family and social resources appeared to partially account for the association between relationship quality and family structure such that the coefficient for the difference in relationship quality between current cohabiters and married fathers was lessened in significance. When the full model was run, the difference between

currently cohabiting fathers and married fathers was still significant. In the full model, both the CES-D and race appeared to be significant in this. For fathers emotional resources and human capital resources did not appear to have any effect on the significant association between marital status and relationship quality. For married, non-premarital cohabiters, emotional resources provided no mediation for the significant difference. These results provide a considerable amount of support for the Crisis and Readjustment of Transitions Perspective, as different types of resources for mothers and fathers caused the association between marital status and relationship quality to drop to non-significance.

Discussion

Overall, cohabiting couples reported lower relationship quality than did married couples who both cohabited before marriage and those who did not, and regardless of possession of resources, experience greater decline in relationship quality after the transition to parenthood. Targeting cohabiting couples who are expecting a child for a relationship intervention could strengthen family relationships around this critical transition period and lead to more stable families and better child outcomes. Cohabiting couples/families are part of the ever changing nature of family and it is vital that these couples and families are given the same chances at personal and societal success as married couples/families. This structure of family is not going to go away if we just sit back and ignore it that instead would only cause a negative cycle through means of relationship quality and resources allotted to the couple. Family science as a whole needs to look at ways to strengthen the public and self-perception of being a cohabiting couple/family. Couples who are cohabiting are certainly not going to see much improvement in relationship quality if they feel negatively judged by their families, their society, and themselves. It is also critical that children who are raised in cohabiting families are given the chance to succeed. With there being many people who do not believe cohabiting families to be healthy or true families, children who encounter these beliefs may in fact have more negative outcomes than children whose parents are married and thus fully accepted by society.

One mechanism that appeared to be important was family and social resources, and, with slight significance in the case of fathers, the relationship with in-laws. While the exact nature of how these

resources affect the couple's relationship quality is uncertain, an intervention that strengthened familial and social relationships so that it could become an additional source of support for new parents rather than a stressor could also lead to positive couple and child outcomes. This mechanism is also important to keep in mind when looking at where there may be flaws in the couple's relationship. Helping to point out that to a couple that their issues in their relationship might not come from their interaction and/or communication with one another might be key in improving their relationship quality and allowing them to bypass the mental accusations of where problems exist. The effect that these relationships/resources seemed to exhibit in this study could be beneficial in looking at family structure, especially during a period of time where we seem to have the ever evolving family. The effects this mechanism seemed to have could unite cohabiting couples and married couples when looking at the definition of a family; given family and social resources as a qualifier, both types of couples/families may begin to be on the same playing field indicating that accepted family structure is not changing but instead adapting to outside influences. Further studies should explore this mechanism in more detail, as it may unknowingly be such an influence on couples, their relationship quality, and reasons for family structure.

For mothers, the acquisition of many different types of resources also seemed to have some dampening effect on the difference between currently cohabiting mothers and married mothers. The effect of emotional resources, which proved to help lessen the significance with married, premarital cohabitation mothers, points to the potential of interventions in the realm of counseling. Seemingly, having someone to talk to about depression issues and/or to help the mothers through them could help mothers to be happier in their relationship. Another mechanism that appeared to have some importance for mothers was human capital resources. Interventions should target helping them through their early years and provide opportunities for education. Education would hopefully lead to a higher income and less stress from financial pressures. With help in these areas, cohabiting mothers could relieve some stress and experience increased wellbeing.

In the full model, for fathers, race appears to be significant. While uncertainty remains about exactly what effect race has on the relationship between cohabitation status and relationship quality, it is

important to also include interventions in terms of race. Interventions in this area, much like for mother's human capital resources, should try to provide opportunities for equal education/job opportunities across races as well as providing empowering support for those in non-white races.

The study proved to have some limitations. The sample size was relatively small and unrepresentative of the general population; race/ethnicity, education, and income among participants were very homogenous, which may have been caused by the study's qualifiers. The study also had to rely on questionnaire data, which could have been effected by participants understanding questions differently or misrepresenting answers. Ideally we would have had observational data to back up the questionnaire data. In further studies, the sample should be expanded to more diverse ethnicities, education levels, and income levels to see if the trends presently found in the data remain consistent. Also, the incorporation of observational data could provide further support for these trends and/or a three-dimensional approach to the hypotheses. Further studies should also look at different combinations of resources in order to find a combination which would most put cohabitating and married couples on equal footing and which would provide for the best types of interventions.

This study provides an outlook into why a given couple's relationship may change after the initial transition to parenthood. It is important to know what resources may cause issues in the relationship to better provide intervention and help where and when to those couples that need it. With a better insight into these aspects of a couple's relationship we can hopefully keep the couples and families that form our ever changing notion of "family" stable and healthy.

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Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for mothers.*

Mothers					
Variable	M	SD	Proportion	alpha	% missing
DAS phase 1	16.79	1.31		.64	1.10
DAS phase 2	16.36	1.61		.61	4.95
DAS phase 4	20.96	2.21		.74	17.03
married, never cohabited			32.58		2.20
married, premarital cohabitation			53.37		2.20
CES-D	1.63	1.96			1.65
Relationship Quality with Father	3.75	1.34			18.68
Relationship Quality with mother	4.33	.92			12.09
Relationship Quality with In-Laws	3.66	1.08			12.09
Religiosity	3.10	.95			2.20
Income	81102.98	42176.04			1.10
College – No Degree			24.73		0.00
Age	28.80	3.96			2.20
Relationship Duration	4.01	2.65			2.75
Race – White			82.97		0.00
Observations	182				

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for fathers.*

Fathers					
Variable	M	SD	Proportion	alpha	% missing
DAS phase 1	16.49	1.46		.63	4.95
DAS phase 2	16.06	1.58		.58	6.04
DAS phase 4	20.71	2.38		.78	17.58
married, never cohabited			32.02		2.20
married, premarital cohabitation			53.37		2.20
CES-D	1.63	1.82			3.85
Relationship Quality with Father	3.71	1.24			23.08
Relationship Quality with mother	3.98	1.04			19.23
Relationship Quality with In-Laws	3.84	.96			15.38
Religiosity	2.86	1.07			3.30
Income	83026.46	40570.22			3.85
College – No Degree			34.81		.55
Age	30.70	4.80			0.00
Relationship Duration	4.21	3.19			3.85
Race – White			85.96		2.20
Observations	182				

Table 3. *Random effects regression models of the association between relationship quality and family structure testing for the mediational role of emotional, family and social, and human capital resources for mothers.*

	Mothers														
	Bivariate			Emotional Resources			Family and social resources			Human capital			Full model		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>
Cohabitation category															
Married, never cohabited	1.08**	0.39		1.07**	0.38	.49	0.96*	0.46	.54	0.95*	0.47	.54	0.77	0.56	.34
Married, premarital cohabitation	1.01**	0.37		0.93*	0.36	.42	0.87*	0.41	.31	0.97*	0.45	.40	0.79	0.51	.15
Currently cohabiting	-			-			-			-			-		
Depressive symptoms				-0.26***	0.05								-0.26***	0.06	
Relationship quality with father							0.14	0.12					0.16	0.13	
Relationship quality with mother							-0.15	0.17					-0.20	0.18	
Relationship quality with in-laws							0.21	0.13					0.18	0.14	
Importance of religion							0.07	0.15					0.13	0.16	
Income										0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	
Education															
Less than a college degree										-			-		
College graduate										-0.30	0.35		-0.40	0.38	
Age										-0.06	0.04		-0.05	0.05	
Relationship duration													0.01	0.06	
Race															
Non-white													-	-	
White													0.02	0.40	
Constant	17.00***	0.33		17.54***	0.46		16.37***	0.89		18.77***	1.04		18.60***	1.55	
F				2.69*			2.37*			2.53*			2.10*		
Chi-square	8.61*			32.44***			12.22*			7.68			31.48**		
R-squared	.02			.06			.03			.02			.08		
Observations	491			489			413			457			384		
Persons	174			174			153			169			148		

+ $p \leq 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4. *Random effects regression models of the association between relationship quality and family structure testing for the meditational role of emotional, family and social, and human capital resources for fathers.*

	Fathers			Emotional Resources			Family and social resources			Human capital			Full model		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>d</i>
Cohabitation category															
Married, never cohabited	1.82***	0.41	.37	1.73***	0.40	.39	1.57**	0.51	.34	2.26***	0.50	.53	1.43*	0.63	.06
Married, premarital cohabitation	1.50***	0.39	.36	1.38***	0.38	.37	1.56**	0.46	.58	1.83***	0.48	.51	1.16*	0.60	.15
Currently cohabiting	-			-			-			-			-		
Depressive symptoms				-0.39***	0.07								-0.46***	0.08	
Relationship quality with father							0.07	0.16					0.13	0.17	
Relationship quality with mother							0.08	0.20					-0.06	0.21	
Relationship quality with in-laws							0.29+	0.16					0.12	0.16	
Importance of religion							0.14	0.15					-0.03	0.15	
Income										0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	
Education															
Less than a college degree										-			-		
College graduate										-0.01	0.31		-0.22	0.34	
Age										-0.07*	0.03		-0.04	0.04	
Relationship duration													-0.01	0.06	
Race															
Non-white													-	-	
White													1.59**	0.52	
Constant	16.25***	0.35		17.08***	0.37		14.21***	0.85		17.75***	0.95		16.44***	1.50	
F	1.31			3.84*			2.42*			.93			2.52**		
Chi-square	20.18***			54.96***			23.34***			24.84***			61.11***		
R-squared	.10			.10			.06			.05			.16		
Observations	477			477			376			441			341		
Persons	171			171			142			168			137		

+ p ≤ 0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001